J O H N A. M c D O U G A L L

"FREE-TRADER"

A BRIEF SKETCH OF HIS LIFE

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by

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Written specially for

The Northern Alberta Pioneers' and Old Timers' Association.

John Alexander McDougall was born at Oakwood on the 20th day of May, 1854. Oakwood is in Ontario about seventy miles north-east of the City of Toronto.

Soon after his birth the family moved to Woodville, a few miles distant, and it was there that John A. grew up and received what schooling it was his fortune to have.

His father, a Highlander, was a tradesman, and poor; his mother was Lowland Scotch. Both were highly intellectual and staunch Presbyterians.

When John was thirteen, his father died, and this necessitated his leaving school and going to work. He first engaged as a helper in a store in Woodville, then left home to clerk in Lindsay. At the tender age of sixteen his employer sent him to a nearby town to close out a branch store, after which he clerked in Cannington for a few years. It was in Cannington that he met Lovisa Jane Amey, whom he later married.

He was ambitious, industrious and resourceful. Always on the alert for opportunities, he once answered an advertisement of a railway company for a telegrapher. The job was offered to him, but he was obliged to decline; having no knowledge of telegraphy. This incident proved a turning point in his career for he next decided to go afar. Soon he found himself at Thunder Bay, at the head of Lake Superior, years in advance of a railway, and yet only a boy of nineteen, without money, but with plenty of pluck. He had travelled steerage in a lake boat.

Thunder Bay, later to be known as Port Arthur, was then only a village. He stayed there a short time employed as an assistant in a watch repair shop.

From this point parties were making up for Manitoba and it was not long before he joined one of the parties, and worked his way. The trip was long and rough. It was partly over a primitive wagon road, but mostly by rivers and lakes, about five hundred miles in all and taking twenty-eight days.

So it was, that he arrived in the West; to Winnipeg in 1873.

Having only a few dollars he first stayed at the immigration shed and 'batched'. Here he listened to much talk about the great plains further West, the fertile Saskatchewan valley, and Fort Edmonton. This fired his imagination and enlivened his spirit of adventure, but the immediate thing to do was to get work. For a time he worked as a common laborer, much to his aversion, for he was a good salesman and a good penman. Next he found a job in a Government office doing clerical work, which was more to his liking but held out little prospect for advancement. He was offered jobs with the Hudson's Bay Company and in the Post Office but each demanded that he sign long-term contracts, and this he would not do. He wanted to get into business for himself and be on his own.

With a little money saved, and a good character, he was able to obtain sufficient credit to start a small grocery business of his own in 1874, within one year of his arrival in Winnipeg. By the time winter set in he had sold all his goods and new stock was not obtainable until the opening of navigation the next spring. That winter conditions were bad, no work to be had, so he improved his time by attending Manitoba College.

Upon the opening of river navigation in the spring and the arrival of supplies, he secured an outfit of goods suitable for trading, some carts and ponies, and went West to the plains to trade with the Indians for furs. This venture proved successful, and as his goods were traded off he would return to Winnipeg, sell his furs, and re-outfit; on each occasion pushing further West. The summer of 1876 found him trading in the vicinity of Edmonton. By this time his stock of goods was of considerable volume and he was able to continue his trading throughout the winter.

His life that winter was a new and strange experience and can best be described in his own words, taken verbatim, from one of his letters written at the time:-

"It is a funny life that I lead, so will tell you a little how it is passed. In the first part of the winter I had a man (a native) engaged to do my trading for me, but he did not suit me so I discharged him, and ever since, I do my own trading with the Indians, going out once or twice every week to sell goods and bring back furs. I sometimes use dogs and sometimes a horse. The way they drive the dogs here is to hitch them up one ahead of the other (using four) to a flat sleigh 10 or 12 feet long and about one foot wide, one half inch thick. On this sleigh I strap my load and away I go, running nearly all the way, off in all directions, through woods, over hills, down and up deep ravines, across creeks and lakes until I reach the Indian camps. They live in leather tents, with the fire in the middle. The first thing they do when I get there is to put the kettle on and make tea when we all have something to eat, me supplying everything of course, after that they fill their pipes and have a smoke, sitting round the fire tailor fashion, while I open my goods, give the men each a plug of tobacco, and commence to trade. I can speak Cree pretty well now, and so get on with them splendidly. Sometimes I don't reach the Indians the first night and so have to camp out in the woods, all alone; getting into the most sheltered spot I cut a lot of dry wood and make a fire, then scrape the snow away, get some willows to spread on the ground to make my bed on. When my bed is made I melt snow and make some tea, then have my supper, it's very plain without any luxuries. After this I sit by the fire and think, think of you and home, the past and the future. This is very lonesome. Sometimes I am out this way when it's snowing and blowing, and so cold have generally to get up several times during the night and put more wood on the fire. Everything is very still except the occasional howl of a wolf, or a lynx, or some night bird."

It was a hard, lonesome life; but he had set himself a goal, and he persevered.

His next year's trading was very successful but by the time he had returned to Winnipeg with his furs the bottom was out of the fur market, and he closed that year heavily in debt. He was not dismayed, he still had plans, and an unshaken faith in a future for the West. He then returned to his home in Ontario, and that winter he did himself well by peddling goods in nearby towns and villages on a commission basis. But by this time he was a Westener, knew the West, and had faith in his own ability to recover his loss and make good, with the help of the right partner. So, on the 20th day of March, 1878, he married, and, accompanied by his wife, returned to Winnipeg to make a fresh start. That was a hard and difficult year for both himself and his young wife, but he made some progress and managed to pay off a little of his previous year's debts. He fully realized the value, and the need, of keeping his credit good.

The next summer he witnessed one of the colorful events of those early romantic years. It was a gathering of five thousand Indians on the plains. He had gone there to trade. Chief "Big Bear" was on the war path and counselling his Indians not to take 'treaty'. War attire (paint and feathers) was predominant. Young McDougall and his young wife were eye witnesses to a great Council of War. Fortunately the Indians did not accept their Chief's counsel and they took treaty. McDougall sold all his goods and returned to Winnipeg for more.

This time he obtained a larger stock and went directly to Edmonton. The route followed was direct, as then known, but took three months to make. He and his wife travelled in a light covered-wagon, but the speed was limited to that of the ox-drawn carts laden with the goods, and was very very slow. In Edmonton he opened up a store. Now, people came to him to buy and trade, and here he made his home. That was in the year 1879.

It may truly be said that Mr. McDougall was in Edmonton at the beginning, for, prior to his arrival Edmonton was little more than one of the many trading

posts of the Hudson's Bay Company. He was one of the first "free traders". He saw Edmonton grow from a trading outpost into a modern City, shared in its good times, and suffered in its bad; experienced hardships, and enjoyed the rewards of his labors. He was always prominent in its life and development, a loyal and worthy citizen. He played a leading part in the establishment of its civic enterprises. He was one of the promoters, and an original director of the first Electric Light and Power Company to serve Edmonton, and it was he who inaugurated the street railway and automatic telephone systems.

In public life Mr. McDougall was actively associated in all community services. For many years he was a member of the School and Aldermanic Boards, he was the first president of the Board of Trade, served Edmonton twice as Mayor, and for five years was member for Edmonton in the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Alberta. He was a member of the first Senate of the University of Alberta.

In private business he attained considerable success in the field of commerce, developing and building his business from that of a small shopkeeper and trader to a large department-store and trading business. In 1897 he took a partner into his business in the person of Richard Secord. Under this partnership fur trading was expanded, branches and connections were established throughout the north country reaching to the Arctic. In 1907 the business of trade and commerce was discontinued, and a financial business set up, which, in 1909, was incorporated under the name of "McDougall & Secord Limited". Thus grew, and expanded, the business of Mr. McDougall's founding.

He at all times retained the respect and trust of his competitors, and unique in the annals of business is the true story of his purchasing a stock of merchandise for a friend and neighbor desiring to enter business in direct competition. Not only did he buy the merchandise, but he marked the cost and selling prices on the goods for his new competitor. Both were successful.

He was well educated, had only the first rudiments of a primary schooling, but all his life was a great reader and student. He was an outstanding mathematician. Without tuition he acquired a knowledge of French, to read, write and speak same.

In stature he was five feet eight, of medium build, quick in action, carried himself erect, and at all times possessed a dignified appearance.

The latter years of his life were spent in travel of which he was particularly fond. On one occasion he made a round-the-world trip, touring extensively in Japan, China, India, Egypt and Europe. The countries of Europe were his allurement, and to these he returned repeatedly, spending much of his time visiting the art galleries, and collecting art treasures for which he had developed a keen appreciation.

Throughout his life he enjoyed the support and companionship of a devoted and loving wife, for whom any words of praise would be an inadequate tribute. That brave little woman, too, was a true pioneer, suffered hardships and privations, but always remained a loyal and constant help.

He had three sons, and three daughters. His wife, sons and two daughters survived him.

John Alexander McDougall died in Edmonton on the 17th day of December, 1928, at the age of seventy-four years, and in Edmonton, the home of his adoption, his remains are at rest.